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ABSTRACT

Current technology enables people to cope with grief through participation in online support groups from the comfort and privacy of their home. The three aspects of grief are emotional, physical, and behavioral. Facing the void left and dealing with the feelings of isolation after the loss of a loved one can be accomplished through online support groups. These kinds of groups experience high usage after tragic events, such as the recent numerous school shootings. This digest discusses increased access to support, specialized online support groups, and the universality of grief as benefiting online support groups for loss. The following are presented as limitations for these groups: anonymity breaches; differing stages of group development and phases of grief; hoax perpetuations; limited feedback; and accountability. (MKA)

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ERIC CASS DIGEST

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Overview

The death of a loved one is a natural and inevitable life experience. Those who must cope with the loss, experience various grief reactions. Typically, people discuss their grief reaction with someone they know or do not discuss it at all. Current technology now enables people to cope with grief through participation in online support groups from the comfort and privacy of their home.

Grief And Healing

The grief process is typically nonlinear, repetitive and painful to transcend. It involves adaptation to many changes, and it is marked by repetitive cycles of progression followed by stagnation or regression. The three aspects of grief are emotional, physical and behavioral (Rando, 1988).

- *Emotional reactions* include fear, anxiety, depression, confusion, search for meaning and anger.
- *Physical symptoms* include changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns, fatigue, increased risk for illness and weight increase/decrease.
- *Behavioral responses* include diminished interest in usual activities, acting out or withdrawal from and/or rejection of support systems.

Online Support

Online support groups for loss assist members in facing the void left by the loss of a loved one and help to reduce members' feelings of isolation and their sense of feeling overwhelmed. These are common reactions during the grieving process. Members in an early phase of grief can share their reactions with others in the group while members in a later phase can offer support and problem solving. Facing holidays and special occasions are considered difficult for most members, especially if this will be their first occasion or holiday since the loss of a loved one (Weinberg, Schmale, Uken & Wessel, 1996). Likewise, those who are terminally ill and/or their loved ones face similar anxieties if they anticipate that approaching holidays and special occasions may be the last ones they celebrate together. See Gary and Remolino (2000) for an excerpt from a typical online support group for loss.

Online support groups are a relatively new and growing cyber service. They can be accessed through use of a computer and modem in conjunction with an Internet service provider (ISP) such as America Online (AOL). Once connected through an ISP, online support groups may also be reached through Internet portals (e.g., Yahoo) or through specialized web sites (e.g., www.death-dying.com). Gary and Remolino (2000) provide a sample of websites for loss and grief. Each ISP, website or portal sets its own standards and procedures regarding regulations, quality control, crisis management, disclaimers and training of group leaders.

Immediate Response To Grief Online

Traumatic events that were once considered local dramas acquire national and international significance as a result of instant and extensive media coverage. Coverage of events such as the numerous school shootings and their resulting deaths between 1997 and 1999 illustrates this point. These events produced a range of emotional reactions in victims and television viewers, including anger, anxiety, depression, and fear. Noteworthy is the role that the Internet is playing in helping people to cope immediately with tragedies involving death such as the recent school shootings. For instance, many ISPs immediately responded by establishing online support groups devoted to a particular school shooting. People went online to try to understand these school tragedies, to reach out to others, to learn how to make schools safe, to cope with school violence, to handle grief reactions, and to recognize danger signs of violence in high-risk youth.

Once the shock wore off and the grieving began, online support groups for loss were overwhelmed in the days and weeks following many of the school shootings. New members, either from the local area of the shootings or from among television viewers, joined veteran online support group members to seek support and to express anger, outrage, and other emotions. Dialogues were strained, and many members seemed to experience inhibition when disclosing intimate feelings. Sessions required strong facilitation skills to encourage participation. Perhaps the strain was partially due to numbness caused by the current trauma, new members' lack of familiarity with the mechanics of online support groups, awkwardness about the online support group's interactive process, or feel overwhelmed by the wide range of emotions expressed online. For veteran members who were already coping with a personal loss, the school tragedies or other traumatic news events can resurrect previous and unresolved loss issues and unrelated grief issues.

Benefits Of Online Support Groups For Loss

- **Increased Access to Support.** Intimate, honest dialogues and expressions of grief can be stigmatizing. Relatives and neighbors may be overwhelmed or unable to offer support and avoid the subject, pushing the frustrated and grieving person into isolation. Online support groups reduce their sense of isolation and loneliness, a predominant reaction for most people in the midst of the grief process or for those who might otherwise grieve alone and not seek a face-to-face support group or support person (Weinberg et al., 1996).
- **Specialized Online Support Groups.** Some loss groups may need to be age- and/or gender-specific or focus on specific needs or characteristics of loss (Koocher, 1996). Specialized online support groups can be formed more successfully than traditional support groups that are limited by geographic boundaries. For example, teens and children may need age-

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specific groups in order to discuss loss issues based on their developmental level (Koocher, 1996). They may be encountering their first experience with death, may be uncomfortable seeking help from adults or may be unable to relate to adult issues about loss in adult online support groups. Similarly, adults may encounter difficulty helping teens and children cope with grief. Youth can access online support groups as long as a parental security block has not been imposed. Parents, however, should be aware of their child's Internet use and should be encouraged to capitalize on the youth's participation in online support groups to strengthen family communication.

• **Universality of Grief.** Others struggle, too, and this is not always evident to grieving people who tend to isolate themselves. Universality unites people as they share similar thoughts, feelings, fears, and/or reactions (Yalom, 1995) with their cybercommunity. They realize that grief is normal, they feel validated, and they heal as they complete the grief process.

Limitations Of Online Support Groups For Loss

• **Anonyminity Breaches.** Limit the disclosure of personal and identifying information when registering for and participating in on-line support groups. Grieving members who are often lonely and feel isolated or desperate may attempt to continue conversations with specific members at the conclusion of a session. Personal communication between members is discouraged as it can culminate in the exchange of identifying information, thus placing a vulnerable member at risk for cyberstalking or at risk for one's physical safety and privacy.

• **Differing Stages of Group Development and Phases of Grief.** Online support groups for loss are open continuously to new membership. Fluctuations in membership make it difficult for online support groups to maintain the working stage of group development for extended periods (Corey & Corey, 1997). Group cohesion is also diluted by each member's individual grief reactions, resulting in a diverse membership that needs support throughout the grief process. These limitations reduce the efficacy of online support groups as a sole support source for some members.

• **Hoax Perpetuations**. People with unscrupulous motives can deceive an online support group, however, online support groups for loss do not attract many hoaxes.

• **Limited Feedback.** Those with cultural or familial barriers that inhibit open discussions about death or emotional expressions of grief may perceive less personal feedback, absence of face-to-face contact, decreased intimacy and reduced intensity as incentives to participate.

• **Accountability.** Participation in online support groups raises some accountability, ethical and legal questions that currently remain unanswered. Accountability is unclear and confusing because online support groups function without regard to geographic borders or local or national laws. Furthermore, professional requirements (or lack of) for hosts are inconsistent.

Conclusion

Online support groups provide assistance by linking grieving people who seek support, especially if support is not available in their local community. However, they are not appropriate for everyone and should not be considered a panacea.

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